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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PTER](#) [MR](#)
SUBJECT: MAURITANIA: MONTHLY POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ROUNDUP
FOR DECEMBER

REF: A. NOUAKCHOTT 549
[1](#)B. NOUAKCHOTT 824

Classified By: Ambassador Mark Boulware for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: The month of December witnessed the second kidnapping of Westerners in Mauritania by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) since the late November abduction of three Spanish NGO workers. The arrest of three Smasside businessmen accused of involvement in the Mauritanian Central Bank fraud scandal galvanized public opinion. The Mauritanian opposition believes these men are being targeted for their tribal and political affiliation while the government states it is leading a campaign against corruption. Eight opposition parties joined forces in a new Coordination of Opposition Forces aimed at strengthening democracy and denouncing the government's "totalitarian tendencies." Taqadoumy journalist Hanevy Ould Deha remains in prison after serving a six month sentence and has started a hunger strike to protest against his arbitrary detention. On the economic front, Mauritania signed agreements with the IMF and Sudan, and secured a loan from the Arab Development Fund. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Update on Spanish kidnapping: On December 2, following the November 29 AQIM kidnapping of three Spanish NGO workers traveling south on Nouadhibou road, Chief of Staff of the National Gendarmerie General Ahmed Ould Bekrine was dismissed and replaced by Secretary General to the Ministry of Defense Colonel NDiaga Dieng, an Afro-Mauritanian. On December 9, President Aziz blamed the kidnappings on "a combination of security failures inherited from past administrations." Aziz said that Mauritanian security forces suffered from decades of mismanagement, and lack of resources and motivation. According to an article published in Spanish newspaper El Mundo on December 31, AQIM is requesting payment of a USD 7 million ransom and the release of salafists held in Mauritanian prison as conditions to liberate the Spanish hostages. Comment: Aziz has had relatively unfettered control of both the military and security services since 2007 so his criticism of "past administrations" rings somewhat shallow. Mauritania has increased its emphasis on a counterterrorism mission in the past several years but given the size of its territory, the basic education of its troops, and economic realities is doubtful to ever field a fully effective deterrent End Comment.

[1](#)3. (U) Italians kidnapped: Two Italian citizens and their Burkinabe driver were abducted near the Mauritanian town of Kobenni in south-eastern Mauritania, close to the Malian border. AQIM claimed responsibility for the kidnapping, which they claimed was conducted "in retaliation for crimes of the Italian Government in Iraq and Afghanistan." This is the second abduction of Westerners in Mauritania since November 29.

[1](#)4. (U) Corruption scandal at the Central Bank: The Nouakchott public prosecutor delivered charges of treason,

forgery and diversion and waste of public funds against the former governor of the Central Bank of Mauritania, Mr. Sidel Mokhtar Ould Nagi, as well as his deputy, Mr. Mahomed Ould Oumarou. They are accused of mismanaging and diverting over USD 93 million between 2000-2001, an amount which is equal to approximately 10% of the 2010 budget for Mauritania. The public prosecutor in Nouakchott also levied charges against three of the most prominent Mauritanian businessmen who have since been taken into police custody by the Commissariat of Economic Crimes. The businessmen are Mohamed Ould Noueiguedh, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of the National Bank of Mauritania (BNM), Cherif Ould Abdellahi, Chairman of the board of the Islamic Bank of Mauritania (BAMIS), and Abdou Maham, a prominent businessman. The three men belong to former President Ould Taya's Smasside tribe and supported opposition parties during the campaign leading to the July 18 election. The three businessmen are accused of diverting public funds and trading in forged currencies as well as collaborating with the former governor of the Central Bank to allow the embezzlement of funds through their accounts and companies. The government claims the charges are strictly part of an anti-corruption drive. Comment: The businessmen were released January 4 following interventions by Islamic leaders and, reportedly, their agreement to repay all illicit transfers. End Comment

15. (U) Mauritanian opposition mobilizes against arrests: Mauritanian opposition leaders held a press conference on December 7 to criticize the arrest of the three businessmen placed in custody for allegedly receiving illicit transfers from the Central Bank. The opposition described these arrests as "payback" for these men's support to the

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opposition and for their affiliation to former President Taya's Smasside tribe. On December 15, police used tear gas and batons to break up a protest in support of the businessmen. The Coordination of Opposition Forces organized a demonstration on December 23 that gathered thousands of supporters.

16. (U) New Coordination of Opposition Forces: On December 10, eight Mauritanian opposition parties signed a Charter to join forces to consolidate democracy in the country. The parties involved are Ahmed Ould Daddah's Rassemblement des Forces Democratiques (RFD), Messaoud Ould Boulkheir's Alliance Populaire Progressiste (APP), Mohamed Ould Maouloud's Union des Forces du Progres (UFP), former President Abdallahi's party the PNDD-ADIL as well as Louleid Ould Weddad's Rassemblement du Peuple Mauritanien (RPM). The Parti pour la Liberte, l'Equite et la Justice (PLEJ) and Abdel Koudouss Abeidna's Union National pour l'Alternance Democratique (UNAD) are also part of the coalition. Islamist party Tawassoul, which was an active member of the FNDD, did not join the coordination.

17. (U) Iranian Ambassador visit: According to Arabic press sources, Iranian Ambassador Tagahiyou Mouaid met with President Aziz on December 14 and gave him a letter of invitation to Iran. The Iranian Ambassador's visit was barely covered by the French-speaking and official media.

18. (C) Hanevy still imprisoned: Taqadoumy Director Hanevy Ould Deha, sentenced to six months in prison in August 19 for acts contrary to Islam (Ref A), was scheduled to be released on December 24 but has been held in prison without explanation. Hanevy started a hunger strike on December 28. Reporters Without Borders called for his release on December 29 stating that keeping him "in jail after having served a completely disproportionate prison sentence constitutes a serious violation of existing laws." On December 30, Ambassador met with Taqadoumy journalists Djibril Diallo and Abbas Ould Braham who were concerned about Hanevy's health given that he has a pre-existing medical condition that could be aggravated by the hunger strike. Hanevy's family had

requested that a doctor of their choice would be allowed to see him as they do not trust doctors chosen by the authorities. Their request was not granted. Note: Diallo told PolOff in confidence that Hanevy fears for his life while in prison. End note. In a meeting with Ambassador Boulware on January 3, President of the Mauritanian Bar Association Ahmed Salem Ould Bouhoubeiny stated he had seen Hanevy that day. Hanevy was increasingly weak from the hunger strike but had been examined by a doctor. For Bouhoubeiny, "there is nothing in Mauritanian law that justifies Hanevy's continued imprisonment." Bouhoubeiny explained that if the authorities intend to raise further charges against Hanevy, they need to release him, issue a proper arrest warrant and re-arrest him. Hanevy's case is one of many cases of arbitrary detention, explained the lawyer. Comment: Ambassador has raised USG concerns about the Hanevy case with the Mauritanian government cautioning that they are risking their international human rights reputation. The Mission continues to raise the case with senior Mauritanian officials (Ref B). End Comment.

¶9. (C) Initiative to open media to the opposition proves difficult: On December 10, the government announced it would re-open public media to the opposition. The Agence Mauritanienne d'Information (AMI), Radio Mauritania and Mauritanian Television generally focus on official news and exclude opposition events and opinions. Note: According to Embassy LES, the closure of media to the opposition occurred after former minister and wali Isselmou Ould Abdel Kader appeared on an October 21, 2008 TV show and stated that "there are foreign mercenaries among the BASEP elements." Then General Aziz dismissed the television director and Abdel Kader spent a few months in jail. End comment. Since the announcement, the authorities have attempted to organize television debates with the opposition. Nevertheless, according to RFD's Ahmed Ould Daddah, the climate of mistrust is such that the opposition and the authorities have been unable to agree on the modalities of the debates. According to Daddah, one of the debates was canceled because the opposition refused to allow its party presidents to participate for fear that their statements would be distorted. They asked to be represented instead by party vice-presidents in order to "test the waters" but the majority declined. Comment: The official media does not have a reputation of offering balanced coverage. Even under the Abdallahi government, stories that put the government in a bad light were never aired. During the period of the coup, the official press reached its nadir -- being called "PRAVDA" by most Mauritians. Since Aziz's inauguration, we have

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noted some tentative efforts to allow alternative views. The government also says it is moving forward on implementing an audiovisual reform that will allow for the creation of private radio and television outlets. End Comment.

¶10. (U) Mauritania signs a formal agreement with the IMF: The IMF signed an agreement with the GIRM which will grant USD 100 million of assistance to Mauritania between 2010-2013. According to the Mauritanian Minister of Finance, this program will enable Mauritania to better control its public finances, strengthen reforms initiated in the financial sector, give more credibility to the exchange markets and strengthen Mauritania's energy policy to better withstand shocks to domestic petroleum production and energy price fluctuations.

¶11. (SBU) Mauritanian-Sudanese agreements signed: During the visit of President El Beshir to Mauritania on December 21, 16 cooperation agreements were signed between the countries, including an agreement that permits visa-free travel for citizens of Mauritania and Sudan to facilitate trade and travel between the countries. Comment: Sudan has relatively significant commercial interests in Mauritania including majority interest in one of the three cellular phone companies. Former President/Colonel Vall is often

associated with those investments. Western diplomats, UN agencies, and the U.S. avoided the traditional diplomatic activities associated with the Sudanese visit. End Comment

¶12. (U) SNIM concludes USD 710 million USD financing drive:

On December 1, SNIM, the largest parastatal company announced it had successfully secured USD 710 million in financing for the construction of the Guelb II iron ore concentrator project, which is intended to increase SNIM's iron ore production capability by up to 3 million tons a year. The financing was acquired by pool of multinational financial institutions and commercial banks. A contract worth USD 630 million was awarded to the Canadian firm SNC-Lavalin to undertake the engineering and construction of this project.

¶13. (U) USD 34 million loan from Arab Development Fund: The Arab Development Fund signed a loan agreement valued at approximately USD 34 million to assist Mauritania in increasing the efficiency and amount of domestic electricity production.

¶14. (U) 2010 Mauritanian budget passed: The Mauritanian parliament passed the 2010 budget, despite abstentions by certain opposition members of the APP, Adil and Tawassoul parties. The 2010 budget of approximately USD 1 billion is a 3.69 percent increase over 2009 expenditures.

BOULWARE